

FROM NUDES TO WINGED RED MONSTERS



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ANNE CARSON, *Glass and God*. Cape, stg £8.00
Autobiography of Red—A Novel in Verse.
Alfred A. Knopf, \$23.00

Glass and God is Anne Carson's first full-length collection to appear in Britain, and comprises all but two of the poems included in her American edition, *Glass, Irony and God*, with the addition of a sequence of prose poems entitled *Short Talks*, previously published independently in Canada. According to Michael Ondaatje, who is quoted alongside Susan Sontag on the back of this book, Carson is "the most exciting poet writing in English today", which, if such customary blurb raves are to be taken seriously, sounds promising enough.

And the book also opens with a delicately titled long poem, "The Glass Essay", which examines the after-effects of a love affair, but also deals with the relationship between a grown-up daughter and her mother. A highly introspective note is struck from the outset as the daughter—the narrator of the poem—records an image of her own face in the bathroom mirror, and to me at least, it is the privacy of her navel-gazing that continues to threaten the integrity of this poem:

When Law left I felt so bad I thought I would die.
This is not uncommon.
I took up the practice of meditation.
Each morning a vision came to me.
Gradually I understood that these were naked glimpses of
my soul.

These glimpses she calls "Nudes"—there are thirteen of them—all seemingly to do with female suffering, and all carefully relayed to us in the following pages. This, for instance, is "Nude" no. 2:

Woman caught in a cage of thorns.
Big glistening brown thorns with black stains on them
where she twists this way and that way
unable to stand upright.

This may be the stuff dreams are made of, but is it poetry? Carson writes in a sort of prose shorthand that occasionally gives the impression of confessional jottings in a diary. While “The Glass Essay” is loosely arranged in three-line stanzas, her voice generally resists any temptations towards rhyme or musical flourish. Obviously, there is no crime in this per se, but when she combines it with these undigested personal dream tableaux, the reader may feel he is being invited to act as the girl’s psychoanalyst.

Still, on the whole Carson is aware of these dangers, and “The Glass Essay” also tries to counterbalance the exclusiveness of the narrator’s self-examinations. Trying to see her own predicament in a larger context, the girl constantly associates herself with her mother, whose home serves as a retreat from the world, and with Emily Brontë, whose *Collected Works* becomes a major point of reference. This to the extent that they become “Three silent women at the kitchen table”: “It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass, / Now and then a remark trails through the glass.” But eventually, the final dream tableau, which also concludes the poem, reads as a gesture towards an all-inclusiveness that promises to break the sense of isolation: “it was not my body, not a woman’s body, it was the body / of us all. / It walked out of the light.”

While the frequent allusion to Brontë, including references to various critics’ interpretations of her works, seem slightly mannered, the passages referring to the mother are much more accomplished. Carson can be a wry observer of the world, and especially when she allows her own sarcasm to take over, the short and snappy sentences serve her poetry well, giving it a fresh, surprising edge (which makes you wonder why the word “Irony” has been excised from the title of the British edition). This quality is most evident in the group of short poems following “The Glass Essay” called “The Truth About God”, as well as in “Short Talks”, the highlight in this collection. “God’s Justice” from “The Truth About God” begins:

In the beginning there were days set aside for various tasks.
On the day He was to create justice
God got involved in making a dragonfly

and lost track of time.
It was about two inches long
with turquoise dots all down its back like Lauren Bacall.

In addition to *Glass and God*, Anne Carson has just come out with a verse novel, *Autobiography of Red*, published in the US by Knopf. A strange hybrid work, it takes as its starting point the surviving fragments of a long poem called Geryoneis, by the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros

(Carson is also a professor of Classics at McGill in Canada). Geryoneis describes the fate of Geryon, a winged red monster in Greek mythology who lived on a red island, tending a herd of cattle until Herakles killed him as one of his Labours. Carson's book seeks to project the story into a modern context, and takes off with a short essay called "Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" Here she points out that "the fragments of the Geryoneis itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it into pieces in a box with some lyrics and some lecture notes and scraps of meat." As it turns out, this is the compositional model for the *Autobiography* itself, and this introductory piece, along with subsequent appendices, reads as a refreshing mixture of scholarship and fiction, reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges' writings. The fragmentary nature of Stesichoros' manuscripts is used by Carson to explore the fragmentary nature of language and meaning itself, as experience through Geryon:

The word each blew towards him and came apart on the wind.
Geryon had always had this trouble: a word like each,
when he stared at it, it would disassemble itself into separate
letters and go.
A space for its meaning remained there but blank.
The letters themselves could be found hung on branches or furniture
in the area.

In this way and others, *Autobiography* echoes concerns also voiced in "Short Talks" from *Glass and God*, which begins: "Early one morning words were missing. Before that, words were not. Facts were, faces were."

As *Autobiography* proceeds, the strange catalogue of short verse fragments gradually takes the shape of a more coherent narrative. Generally, one suspects Carson is more at ease when she stops worrying about line-breaks, and relaxes into a clipped form of prose. Also Geryon, whom we follow from his infancy, manages to emerge from the "red dawn jelly" of a sci-fi dream-world which Carson at first creates around him, and with his red wings tugged conspicuously under an overcoat, he becomes a more engaging character. And if his appearance as a winged red monster threatens at times to become a disappointing emblem of difference (pubescent anxieties, homosexuality, etc.), his engagement with the world around him—at one stage mediated through a camera that seeks to freeze time—and the philosophical considerations that make up his autobiography, make this highly idiosyncratic work a more thrilling read than *Glass and God*.